United Church of Christ

Manual on Church

Volume I
Draft 2

January 1, 2005

Perspectives and Procedures

For Association and Local Church Covenantal Partners

United Church of Christ Manual on Church:

Perspectives and Procedures for Covenantal Partners

Table of Contents

Preface 3

The Church Shaped by Covenant 5

Autonomy and Oversight in Covenantal Relationship 9

Expectations of Associations in Covenant with Local Churches 14

Expectations of Local Churches in Covenant with Associations 18

Entering into Covenant 22

A Chart Summarizing the Procedure for Entering into Covenant 27

Dissolution of Covenantal Partnership 28

Characteristics of Faithful Covenantal Relationships 31

Supplemental Materials 34

Glossary and Endnotes 37

Preface

Can there be a *Manual on Church* in the United Church of Christ? Can this denomination, which has honored with tolerance the traditions and polities of its various predecessor bodies, come to agreement on one set of guidelines or expectations for the characteristics of faithful churches of the United Church of Christ? Can Associations and Conferences, as concerned about their own practice of autonomy as are local churches, choose to forge a common path of exemplary practices by which to live out covenantal unity? Can Local Church Ministries channel the Spirit-filled diversity of interactive partnership among local, Association, Conference, and national settings of the Church so that each may feel the bonds of covenant that strengthen nurture and support, and offer responsibility and accountability?

We shall see. This is a beginning toward shaping the discernment of the covenantal partners of the United Church of Christ concerning what it means to be expressions of church within the Church.

While a *Manual on Church* should rightfully delineate the expectations all covenantal partners have of one another, we focus in this first volume on the key relationship between local churches and their corresponding Association, or Conference acting as an Association. The issues that surface among and between local and wider settings of the United Church of Christ will be taken up in later editions of this manual.

Again, this is a beginning. For some that is less than hoped. But in the United Church of Christ decisions are made "by consultation and collaboration" among the various partners as we "seek to walk together in all God's ways" (*Constitution*, Article 3).

The Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team has purposefully chosen in this document to address matters for which there is either clear United Church of Christ constitutional support, or broad consensus among Associations and Conferences. Thus, at the head of each chapter, you will find references to the formative documents of the Church. Where there is yet no commonly discerned United Church of Christ procedure or practice, this manual presents options, not solutions. For example, we hear the lament; "there must be some way to hold churches accountable for inappropriate activity or behavior." We concur. But the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team does not and should not unilaterally prescribe church discipline.

We are encouraged as we recall the history of the development of the *Manual on Ministry*. Today this burgeoning binder is the trusted guide adopted by most Associations and Conferences of the United Church of Christ for their work in the authorization of ministers. In its first draft, penned in 1962, the *Manual on Ministry* was a slim pamphlet that set few expectations but pointed out the need for more uniform practices.

It is time to begin again. The Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team hears concerns and requests from some Associations and Conferences acting as Associations that are asking tough questions about how to discipline or remove standing from local churches whose witness is non-responsive to the covenant. Meanwhile, some local churches and their leaders express frustration that they have little ability to hold their Association or Conference accountable for offering sufficient nurture and support to congregational life. Each is asking for guidelines that will "flesh out" what being in covenantal partnership really looks like.

Cutting across this discussion are the cross currents of autonomy and accountability. The 1957 merger that created the United Church of Christ was forged in a context that necessitated a strong constitutional assurance of local church autonomy. A generation later the United Church of Christ amended its constitution to make explicit the covenantal nature of its polity. With the restructure of the national setting of the United Church of Christ in 2000, the various covenantal partners have a new opportunity to examine how autonomy is shaped by covenant and how covenantal polity differs from congregational or connectional polity.

We make in these pages a clear beginning, and we echo the writers of the initial *Manual on Ministry* who prayed,

> *"...it is our hope that the ways of doing things outlined in the pages that follow will so commend themselves to our Associations and Conferences that in whole or in part they will become customary throughout the United Church."*[1]

May the God of all beginnings bless the dialogue and discernment that will follow from this manual. We look forward to discussion with our diverse covenant partners that will improve the insufficient and silent places in this new publication. Please share with the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team the ways your Association, Conference or local church has worked on the issues of covenantal partnership, accountability and oversight so that we might learn from your experience.

Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team
Local Church Ministries
January, 2005

The Church Shaped by Covenant

> *We Covenant with the Lord and with one another and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed Word of truth. Salem, 1629*
>
> *Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways. UCC Constitution,* Article III, paragraph 6.
>
> *God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races. God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory. From the UCC Statement of Faith, adapted by Robert Moss*

How we organize our lives tells something important about what we believe. Likewise, the way the United Church of Christ is designed shows what it believes. How we view the church and its purpose is called our ecclesiology. Birthed amid mergers and ecumenical concerns, the United Church of Christ emphasized the centrality of Christ as sole Head of the Church in its ecclesiology.

The United Church of Christ has affirmed the Reformation tradition of lifting up the marks of the church. When do we see the church being faithful? When the Word is rightly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, the church and its ministry are appropriately ordered or organized, and the mission of God is its reason for being. Still, finer points about the nature and purpose of the church were not insisted on in creedal form in the United Church of Christ, in part so the hard-won unity of our predecessor traditions would be upheld.

As the United Church of Christ lived into its formative years, it revised its *Constitution and Bylaws*, and created *The Statement of Faith* and the 1987 *Statement of Mission*. At each point of reflection, the theology of what it means to be Church was more clearly

defined and owned; leading one scholar to explain, the United Church of Christ has an "ecclesiology in progress."[2]

God's Purpose for the Church

Notice how the *Statement of Faith* outlines what it means to be the Church. To understand the nature of the church in the United Church of Christ we must first understand that the church exists because God's Holy Spirit has called us together and bound us in covenant for the purpose of a particular mission. God calls the Church into covenant for particular purposes. Bound together in this covenant, as disciples, serving the whole human family, proclaiming the gospel, resisting the powers of evil, and sharing baptism and table, passion and victory, with Christ we form what many call the beloved community. We covenant together as a beloved community to carry out the mission God would have us fulfill together.

Beloved community, seeking justice, engaged in God's mission

We see the idea of the church as beloved community in the United Church of Christ's engagement with the ideal of becoming a multi-cultural, multi-racial church, open and affirming of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-gendered persons, accessible to and inclusive of all people regardless of ability. As our General Minister and President, John Thomas, has reminded – we are a church of extravagant welcome, early truth telling and radical reconciliation. The foundation for this work is the gracious gift of love, freedom and justice given to us by God.

In covenant with one another, we are called to seek a deeper beloved community resting in the mutual struggle for justice, reconciliation, and liberation. In this way we participate in the mission of God. By inviting others to share in the reconciling work of God in the world we invite them into discipleship with Christ, and to share the full spiritual riches of communion at Christ's table. Lest our community become too focused on itself, God calls the church to engage the powers of evil in the world in order to participate with Christ in reconciling the world to God. We enter into covenant with one another to support this discipleship; to celebrate its joys and to share its costs.

Let's take a closer look at what we mean by the word "covenant." The idea of covenant is firmly rooted in the Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures tells of God's desire to find a covenant partner. Initiated by God's action, the covenant at Mt. Sinai, "I will be your God and you will be my people," became an "ever-present yardstick"[3] by which the events of Israel's history were judged.

Jeremiah, writing after the Exile, prophesies about a New Covenant that God will establish with Israel. A day will come when external law will no longer be the means of enforcing covenant. Instead, each believer will know God in such a way that the law will be written on their hearts.

The New Testament expanded this concept of New Covenant, especially as it relates to God's actions in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. At the Last Supper Jesus explained the cup of wine as a symbol of his sacrifice, "a new covenant in my blood." He initiated this covenant once for all, binding each Christian in obedience to Christ. The new covenant does not do away with previous covenants God has made; instead, as 2 Corinthians 3:6 asserts, Christians are heirs to the covenants of the past. "God never betrays the call, gifts, and promises given to God's people."[4]

From the earliest roots of the congregational covenant made at Salem, Massachusetts in 1629 to the extensive restructure of the national setting of the United Church of Christ in 2000, the discernment of God's will for our Church has been covenantal in nature. To invoke covenant involves the following key factors.[5]

God initiates Covenant

The foundation of the church is God's gracious invitation, God's call to us. In biblical terms, the covenant is always formed at God's initiative.[6] Covenant is serious; not to be entered into lightly, but diligently and prayerfully.

Covenants differ from contracts

A covenant is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Unlike a legal agreement, covenants do not operate under a contractual *quid pro quo*, i.e. "you paint my house, and I'll pay you." Rather, covenant is a broader promise: "we will walk together in all God's ways" rather than a restrictive list of the specific things each partner must fulfill. In covenant, the partners must keep trying to discern what those ways are.

Covenant promises are to be taken very seriously. Covenant does not dissolve automatically at the point that the parties disagree or experience discomfort, or when change occurs. Relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to maintain and strengthen their mutual covenant, partners will work intentionally and diligently.

Covenant knits us together

Regrettably, covenantal partners sometimes see differences as difficulties. Bound by covenant, all settings of Church agree to walk even with people whom we experience as difficult. As John Winthrop declared, we are "knit together as one" despite all our diversities. Covenant demands mutual respect, regardless of the status, behavior, or achievements of our covenantal partners.

In summary, covenant requires great spiritual maturity. Humility and patience, compassion and justice hold us to the mission of being "united and uniting." We may wish for more concrete assertions in our covenant promises. Still, the United Church of Christ affirms the open-ended faithfulness of God who has established covenant with us. "Constituted by divine grace, what holds the United Church of Christ together from the human side are two things: a common faith in Jesus Christ as sole Head of the church, and sets of covenant promises exchanged by the covenantal partners."[7]

The United Church of Christ has been characterized as "a covenanted relationship of autonomous units of church life—a relationship delineated but not regulated by a constitution and bylaws."[8] Clearly, that dynamic tension between autonomy and covenant are at the heart of what it means to be the United Church of Christ. We have chosen, repeatedly, not to be solely separate churches, each acting alone. We have chosen, repeatedly, not to exercise apostolic hierarchy that insists on top-down regulation. We have insisted, always, on the importance of "walking together in all of God's ways."

Autonomy and Oversight in Covenantal Partnership

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. Constitution, Preamble, paragraph 2.

Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways. Constitution, Article III.

The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility. Constitution, Article V, paragraph 17.

The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it, nor shall be construed as giving to the General Synod, or to any Conference or Association now, or at any future time, the power to abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs, which affairs include, but are not limited to, the right to retain or adopt its own methods of organization, worship and education; to retain or secure its own charter and name; to adopt its own constitution and bylaws; to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit members in its own way and to provide for their discipline or dismissal, to call or dismiss its pastor or pastors by such procedure as it shall determine; to acquire, own, manage and dispose of property and funds; to control its own benevolences; and to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ at any time without forfeiture of ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it. Constitution, Article V, paragraph 18.

> *Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church. Constitution,* Article V, paragraph 19.

Some churches prize the concept of local church autonomy as their most important core value. We say they have congregational polity. In other churches, supervisory oversight by judicatories takes precedent over local ways for churches. These churches have a connectional polity. United Church of Christ polity upholds both autonomy and oversight. Both autonomy and oversight are essential, but they stand in tension and are interpreted within the mutual regard of covenantal relationship. Covenant means that each setting of the Church agrees to be held accountable by the others, and each agrees to allow its individual identity to be shaped, in part, by its relationship to the other settings of the United Church of Christ.

Autonomy in a Covenantal partnership

Every unit of the church, while in covenant with the other units, has a non-transferable responsibility to discern and respond to the call of God to it—God's will and way for it—in its time and place.[9]

Autonomy as self-definition and self-governance

The word *autonomy* comes from classical Greek (*autos*, self; and *nomos*, portion, custom, pattern, law, from *nemein*, to allot) and means, fundamentally, self-governance. It evokes personal responsibility to define and manage oneself, rather than governance by or dependence on others.

Paragraph 18 of the *United Church of Christ Constitution* can be read as a list of rights that establish a local church's freedom from outside governance and dependence, but it can also be read as a list of responsibilities that the local church must assume for itself. The fundamental responsibility of the Church in every setting is to discern the call of God to it—God's will and way for it—its mission—in its place and time.

Autonomy as capacity to covenant

In such a discernment process, it is wise to turn to others for counsel, critique, and support. That is what "associating" (Association) and "conferring" (Conference) are about. "Walking together in all of God's ways" is a practice of autonomous settings of Church that value input from and community with their covenant partners. Those who have a clear sense of themselves, who have autonomy, have the capacity to make covenant promises and to live in mutual regard.

Autonomy is fundamentally freedom for, not merely freedom from. It entails a kind of freedom from the rule of others, but this is not a freedom to ignore what others require or have to say; it is freedom to listen, evaluate, decide, and act for oneself through the highest exercise of reason and discernment. Viewing autonomy only as freedom from outside governance or dependence holds the danger of foolish pride, which is itself an expression of irresponsibility. Viewing autonomy as freedom for growing together in

discernment of God's will and way is a highly responsible way of living out the promises of covenant.

Autonomy and ministries of scale and timeliness

Each expression of church has its own primary sphere of responsibility and influence, but in different settings the scope of that responsibility and influence has its own magnitude or scale. Thus the local church has the local social unit in which it is situated: a town, township, neighborhood or section of a city. Associations have their own more-or-less corresponding social units, such as counties or regions. Conferences have theirs, typically states or regions. The General Synod and Covenanted Ministries carry out God's mission in the nation and the world.

The concept of autonomy underscores the specific, non-transferable responsibility each setting of Church has for its own primary sphere of ministry on its own scale. This authority of each body, within its scope--local, regional, and national—to discern the moment and minister accordingly is a strength of the United Church of Christ polity. Each unit of the church is able to respond or to take initiative when the time is ripe or when the need cries out, because it is not necessary to work through other channels for authorization. There is risk in this virtue: covenantal partners may regret their own or another partner's hasty or ill-advised actions.

United Church of Christ covenantal partners make a distinction between *authorization* and *consultation*. It is not necessary for all affected covenantal partners to "sign off on" or authorize an action. Nevertheless, consultation among the partners, before the decision of one affects all, is expected. Counsel from and collaboration with others is always desirable and to be sought. One of the difficult demands of living in covenantal partnership involves planning enough time for such communication with other settings of the church.

Autonomy, authority, and accountability

The authority of an autonomous setting of church in a covenantal polity is neither absolute nor self-generated. Its accountability is not merely to itself. Authority flows from its relationship with the sole Head of the church, Jesus Christ. Similarly, its accountability is to Christ. This has several implications.

Christ is sole Head. Jesus challenged the disciples to forego cultural patterns whereby leaders lorded over others. He instructed his followers to engage in mutual servanthood (Mark 10:35-45 and parallels). Autonomy is a way of saying that no church body in any setting of the United Church of Christ has authority over any other expression of church: before Christ, all are on equal footing.

Each church body, however, does have authority. Covenantal polity means that each is to be taken seriously, particularly as it embodies, gives voice to, and lives out, what it discerns to be God's will and way. This is the assertion of paragraphs 17 and 19 in the *Constitution*.

Each body is accountable to all the others. Accountability calls for gracious confrontation—the grace of rejoicing in, bearing with, and forgiving one another—together with the courage to speak in love the truth which needs to be said (Ephesians 4:25), especially if covenantal ties appear to have been breached.

Communication among partners and the public

Each expression of the United Church of Christ has the responsibility, freedom, and authority to speak its own mind—speak for itself—in and from its particular place and time. Because of this uniqueness of each expression of church, no other church body can speak for it. But each can—and has the responsibility to—speak and listen to the others. It is appropriate for autonomous bodies in covenantal relations to suggest, request, recommend, urge, and hold accountable; to question, grieve, regret; but not to command, require, or condemn.

No setting of church can ever presume to speak for every expression of the United Church of Christ. But it can often be said: "We may not all be of one mind about this, but the prevailing mind of the United Church of Christ is…" It may sometimes need to be added, "A sizable minority, however…"

A designated leader in this church—by election, ordination, installation or other authorization—has a representative responsibility to describe to the church and to the public the convictions, positions, and actions of the various bodies in the various settings of the church, and most particularly the body one is called and installed to serve. Insofar as one is accurate in such descriptions, one can be said to speak for the bodies whose actions are described. This is particularly true when the speaker has discerned a widespread consensus in the church.

But secular media, the general public, and, regrettably, many UCC members are not disciplined to make these distinctions. In order to honor and uphold the variety of convictions which exist throughout the Church, leaders need to value, communicate and exercise this representative responsibility with courage and care.

The Oversight of Local Churches in Covenantal Partnership

The covenant promise to "walk together in all God's ways" can be pulled apart if autonomy is abused as separatist power. The mutuality of covenant can also be abused if a imposition of authority is used to force compliance from covenantal partners. The language of the *Constitution and Bylaws* reflects attention to these potential abuses. Local churches are not held accountable to their covenantal partners in regulatory fashion. Instead, the Church in all its settings is called upon to support and equip local churches while remaining faithful to the high standards and integrity of a ministry which is not ours, but God's.

This role of nurture and accountability from Associations and Conferences acting as Associations toward local churches in their geographic areas is known as the ministry of oversight. The term *oversight* is used because it conveys the commitment of the United Church of Christ to nurture local churches in covenantal partnership, while at the same

time we hold one another accountable for the gospel of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the whole people of God.[10]

Oversight expresses much in the English language that is conveyed by the Greek word *episcope*—a word that comes to us from deep within the Christian scriptures, our ecclesiology, and our faith traditions. In fact, the root meanings of these two words convey the same essential thought.[11]

Many persons associate the word *episcope* with the exercise of authority or power by one person over another. However, this is not the primary or most frequent use of the word in the Christian scriptures. Rather, the word is most often used to describe activities that nurture and strengthen those most in need. Throughout Christian scripture, oversight embodies this sense of visitation and care. Oversight is tending the flock from a perspective of service, nurture and support. Power and authority—even supervisory power and authority—must always be tempered with love, mercy, compassion, and justice.

The United Church of Christ values and affirms such an understanding of *episcope*. Associations utilize *episcope* or oversight to strengthen and equip local churches in covenantal relationship with the United Church of Christ so that they continue to be effective and embody the integrity God requires. Oversight of local churches utilizes care and nurture that focus on what is most important and essential for the fulfillment of God's mission. Such supervision is a sacred responsibility to be carried out in a context of prayerfulness and candor as the Association, or Conference acting as an Association[12], seeks to discern the Holy Spirit's leading in each instance.

Accountability and supervision are inseparable from the roles of nurture and support of local churches. While the Association or Conference acting as an Association must show regularity of visitation and pastoral concern for churches within its care it may also develop policies concerning the fitness or discipline of local churches. Policy making that includes wide representation from the congregations and authorized ministers within the Association helps to build fair and well developed methods of supervision and discipline.

Expectations of Associations in Covenantal Partnership with Local Churches

> *An Association is that body within a Conference of the United Church of Christ which is composed of all Local Churches in a geographical area, all Ordained Ministers holding standing or ordained ministerial partner standing therein, all Commissioned Ministers of the Association, and those Licensed Ministers who have been granted voting membership in the Association. Constitution,* Article VIII, paragraph 38.
>
> *Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from… an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church. Constitution,* Article V, paragraph 19.
>
> *The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility. Constitution,* Article V, paragraph 17.
>
> *Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways. Constitution,* Article III.

Covenantal Expectations of Associations

As a covenantal partner seeking to "walk together in all God's ways", the Association will conduct all of its ministries with integrity and dedication, so that the whole body of Christ may be enriched.

Ministry of Oversight

We recognize that not all Associations have the size, staff and/or resources to fulfill the responsibilities and expectations which are listed below. In these instances, churches can look to their Conference.

The Association is expected to:

- Plan and conduct meaningful, regular meetings of the Association, receiving and acting upon business referred to it by its local churches, its Conference, the General Synod and other bodies[13]
- Elect officers and convene standing committees, task forces, working groups and ministry teams as may be necessary for the correlation of its work with that of the Conference and the General Synod
- Support, encourage and resource the mission and ministry of local churches
- Oversee the nurture and accountability of authorized ministers
- Offer encouragement, guidance and assistance in the organization of new local churches
- Collect and interpret statistics, data, annual reports and other information that will help the Association in carrying out its work
- When necessary, petition and overture its Conference or the General Synod.

The Association is charged with the oversight of its local churches. The Association will conduct its ministries in a manner that will strengthen and enhance the life of all of the local churches. Toward that end the Association will offer encouragement, guidance, and accountability.

Local churches can look to their Association or Conference for resources including, but not limited to:

- Christian Education, youth ministry, resource centers, leadership development
- Stewardship, mission, justice
- Organizational life: Constitution and bylaws, Pastor Parish relations, suggested processes and structures, fiscal management
- Conflict resolution and management
- Planning, visioning, mission statements.

The Association or Conference acting as an Association is charged with the oversight of authorized ministers of the Association. This work includes, but is not limited to:

- Preparing and approving candidates for ordination, commissioning or licensing
- Authorizing and granting the standing of authorized ministers. Providing pastoral support for authorized ministers and local churches with standing in the Association
- Providing support for those involved in the Search and Call process
- Providing opportunities for continuing education, training and spiritual growth
- Investigating and adjudicating allegations of misconduct by clergy, staff, or local churches.

Mutual Accountability

The Association or Conference provides ministries and structures in covenantal support of the organizational life of local churches. Decisions by the Association will be made in consultation and collaboration with its various covenantal partners. As members of the Body of Christ, the Association will honor and respect the work and ministry of each expression of Church. The Association will listen, hear, and carefully consider the advice, counsel, and requests of local, Conference, and national settings of the United Church of Christ.[14]

The Association offers faithful stewardship of its financial resources. The Association determines its own method for securing financial support. In partnership with the Conference, the Association is empowered to use the available resources, in ethical and legal ways, to provide adequate staffing, ministries, resources, and mission support to strengthen the life and work of the local church and Our Churches Wider Mission.

As a representative body of the United Church of Christ, the Association will faithfully fulfill its constitutionally mandated responsibilities, and shall ensure that the Constitution and Bylaws of the Association are consistent with the *Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ*, and of the Conference of which the Association is a part.

Serve as a faithful steward

The Association, when applicable, will serve as an ethical and caring steward of its paid staff members and volunteers. As covenantal partners, the Association will utilize the United Church of Christ Search and Call process when seeking new pastoral leadership. The Association will abide by applicable human resources policies and procedures concerning calling or hiring, supervision, accountability, ongoing employee support, leave of absence, separation and dismissal or termination of employment. The Association will adhere to the legal standards of employment (e.g., minimum wage standards, workers' compensation, federal and state employment taxes, background checks for those who work with children, etc.).

The Association is expected to set high standards of practice for providing nurture, training, recognition and support for those who serve in the United Church of Christ. When appropriate, the Association will insure that paid staff members and unpaid volunteers:

- Are carefully screened and interviewed before calling, hiring, or volunteer assignment
- Have written clear terms of call and/or contracts with specific job descriptions; Clergy shall have written clear terms of call, as indicated in Call Agreements and/or contracts with specific job descriptions based on the Manual on Ministry's Code of Ethics for the local church
- Receive fair compensation, leave time, training opportunities and benefits;
- Receive regular, fair and helpful evaluations
- Clergy on staff shall have current and active Authorized Ministerial Standing in the United Church of Christ

- The Association will operate with integrity and fidelity, and within legal and ethical norms. The Association is expected to be honorable in its public and private conduct, to obey the laws of its State and Nation, to conduct its business in an ethical and legal manner, and to protect itself from legal actions. This is especially important in the following areas:
- Management of funds and resources
- Oversight of authorized ministries
- Human Resource policies and practices
- Honesty in information reporting and public statements.

There may be occasions where justice demands that the Association raise a voice contrary to prevailing social norms, and perhaps even engage in civil disobedience.

Expectations of Local Churches in Covenantal Partnership with Associations

Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways. Constitution, Article III.

The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility. Constitution, Article V, paragraph 17.

The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it, nor shall be construed as giving to the General Synod, or to any Conference or Association now, or at any future time, the power to abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs, which affairs include, but are not limited to, the right to retain or adopt its own methods of organization, worship and education; to retain or secure its own charter and name; to adopt its own constitution and bylaws; to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit members in its own way and to provide for their discipline or dismissal, to call or dismiss its pastor or pastors by such procedure as it shall determine; to acquire, own, manage and dispose of property and funds; to control its own benevolences; and to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ at any time without forfeiture of ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it. Constitution, Article V, paragraph 18.

Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church. Constitution, Article V, paragraph 19.

Covenantal Expectations of the Local Church

As a covenantal partner seeking to walk together in all God's ways, the local church will conduct all of its ministries with integrity and dedication, so that the whole body of Christ may be enriched.

Self-governance of its own ministries

Following Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the local church will take responsibility for the operation of its own ministries including, but not limited to:

- The right to retain or adopt its own methods of organization, worship and education
- Adopt its own constitution and bylaws
- Formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith;
- Admit, disciplining and dismissing members
- Call or dismissing its pastor or pastors
- Own and managing its property and funds
- Allocate its own benevolences.

Mutual Accountability

The local church provides covenantal support for the organizational life of the Association, the Conference, and the Covenanted Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Decisions by the local church will be made in consultation and collaboration with its various covenantal partners. As members of the Body of Christ, the local church will honor and respect the work and ministry of each expression of Church. The local church will listen, hear, and carefully consider the advice, counsel, and requests of Association, Conference, and national settings of the United Church of Christ.

As a representative body of the United Church of Christ, the local church will faithfully fulfill its constitutionally mandated responsibilities, and shall ensure that the Constitution and Bylaws of the local church are consistent with the *Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ*, and of the Conference and Association of which the local church is a part.

Local churches choose to work with the Covenanted Ministries in a variety of ways. The following expectations are outlined in Article IV of the *Bylaws of the United Church of Christ*:

Working in partnership with the Office of General Ministries in ways and means appropriate to its time and place, the local church will strive for theological reflection, ecumenical and interfaith partnership and dialogue, and financial support of Our Church's Wider Mission. It shall strive to reflect the diversity of society in its leadership, keeping in mind the United Church of Christ commitment to becoming a multi-cultural, multi-racial church, open and affirming, accessible to all.

Working in partnership with Local Church Ministries in ways and means appropriate to its time and place, local churches will strive for vitality as inclusive and accessible

communities of mission, evangelism, church development, unity, and justice so that the good news of Jesus Christ will be proclaimed in word and deed.

Working in partnership with Justice and Witness Ministries in ways and means appropriate to its time and place, the local church will engage in God's mission by direct action for the integrity of creation, justice, and peace. Such mission includes, but is not limited to:

- Speaking prophetically on matters of justice, power, and public policy
- Confronting racism, sexism, ageism, classism, and other expressions of injustice and alienation in the Church and in society
- Providing support for the Church's ministry of service with and on behalf of those who are poor, the forgotten and the oppressed, and for those marginalized by stigma and discrimination because of their sexual orientation or their disabilities, including mental illness.

Working in partnership Wider Church Ministries, in ways and means appropriate for its time and place, the local church will support and participate in the global church. Such mission includes, but is not limited to:

- Interfaith dialogue
- Volunteer ministries
- Health care, education, disaster relief, social services
- Education and advocacy on national and global issues
- Sharing in the sending and receiving of missionaries.

Participation in the Association and Conference

As covenantal partners local churches will "walk together," serving the ministry and mission of Christ through the Association and Conference. Such participation will include, but not be limited to:

- Providing delegates to the Association and Conference meetings, where wider church policies and positions are determined and national representatives are selected.
- Participating in Ecclesiastical Councils, Ordinations, Installations and other celebrations in the life of the wider setting
- Nominating representatives from among its members for election or appointment to the standing committees, task forces and working groups of the Association, and Conference
- Providing statistics, data, annual reports, and other information that helps the Association in carrying out its work.

Serve as a faithful steward

The local church is expected to prayerfully consider its ability to give, and will provide reasonable and consistent support for the ministry of Christ through the work of the wider church by:

- Where applicable, making timely *per capita* payments to the Association and Conference

- Contributing generously to Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) through a designated gift that is approved by the local church
- Providing support for United Church of Christ related seminaries, agencies, and special offerings
- Where applicable, encouraging the appropriate use of endowed funds to provide support for the ministry and mission of the United Church of Christ.

The local church is expected to use its available financial resources, in ethical and legal ways, to provide adequate staffing, resources and mission support to strengthen its life and work.

Local churches will serve as ethical and caring stewards of its paid staff and volunteers. As covenantal partners, the local church will utilize the United Church of Christ Search and Call process when seeking new pastoral leadership. The local church is expected to abide by reasonable and just human resource policies and procedures on calling or hiring, supervision, accountability, ongoing support, leave of absence, separation, and dismissal or termination of employment. The local church is expected to adhere to the legal standards of employment practice (e.g., minimum wage standards, workers' compensation, federal and state employment taxes, background checks for those who work with children, etc.).

The local church is expected to set high standards of practice for providing nurture, training, recognition and support for those who serve. When appropriate, the local church will insure that its paid staff members and unpaid volunteers:

- Are carefully screened and interviewed before calling, hiring or volunteer assignment
- Have written clear terms of call and/or contracts with specific job descriptions. Clergy shall have written clear terms of call, as indicated in Call Agreements and/or contracts with specific job descriptions based on the Manual on Ministry's Code of Ethics for the local church
- Receive fair compensation, leave time, training opportunities and benefits.
- Receive regular, fair and helpful evaluations
- If clergy, have current and active Authorized Ministerial Standing in the United Church of Christ.

The local church will operate with integrity and fidelity, and within legal and ethical norms. The local church is expected be honorable in its public and private conduct, to obey the laws of its State and Nation, to conduct its business in an ethical and legal manner, and to protect itself from legal actions. This is especially important in the following areas:

- Management of funds and resources.
- Human Resource policies and practices.
- Honesty in information reporting and public statements.

There may be occasions where justice demands that the local church raise a voice contrary to prevailing social norms, and perhaps even engage in civil disobedience.

Entering into Covenant

At some point in its history, each of the local churches that comprise the United Church of Christ entered into Covenant with the denomination. For many whose history precedes the 1957 merger, a congregational vote to become part of the United Church of Christ, or a vote to approve the *Constitution* signified their entry into covenantal relationship. For those from the Evangelical and Reformed Church, a vote of their Synod signified the beginning of covenantal relationship with the United Church of Christ. Local churches that came into being after 1957 entered into covenant with the United Church of Christ after careful study, discussion and a congregational vote that led to receiving standing from an Association or Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Some local churches from the Congregational Christian tradition (schedule 1 and 2 churches) are not part of the United Church of Christ but have been admitted to or continue fellowship in a Conference or an Association. Those congregations do not hold covenantal relationship with the United Church of Christ. (*Constitution*, Article V, paragraph 16)

Local Church Ministries has outlined a common process to guide Associations and local churches wishing to establish covenant with the United Church of Christ. The following guidelines and chart of responsibilities are revised from *Considering a New Church Covenant in the United Church of Christ: A Process for Exploring, Developing, and Affirming New Relationships.*

New Church Starts, or Churches in Formation, come into being in a variety of ways:

- As a project of the Association/Conference
- As a project of ecumenical partnership
- As a satellite of an established United Church of Christ congregation
- As a self-starting group seeking affiliation with the United Church of Christ
- As an established congregation seeking affiliation with the United Church of Christ.

New Churches wishing to enter covenantal relationship with the United Church of Christ need to request and receive formal standing in an Association or Conference. The Association oversees this process of guiding Churches in Formation toward standing in the United Church of Christ.

In its formation, a New Church needs to organize its life with some official documents. These vary by state laws, but may include such items as: 501 c 3 non-profit status, a tax exempt number, Articles of Incorporation, a Constitution and Bylaws, and Officers. For guidance in securing such documents, and for collaboration in the discernment of God's mission for the local church, New Church Starts should work closely with the Association, or Conference acting as an Association.

Associations may find the following guidelines on establishing covenant with the United Church of Christ to have bearing on their processes for churches in formation. However, this section of the *Manual on Church* specifically outlines procedures to guide Associations as they work with established local churches that seek affiliation with and standing in the United Church of Christ.[15]

Exploring and Establishing Covenant

A local church becomes a part of the United Church of Christ by uniting with other local churches in a covenantal relationship (*Constitution*, Article V, par. 17). This relationship is one characterized by trust, mutual commitment, promises and the kind of shared experiences that are rooted in commitment to God. All settings of the Church—local, Association, Conference and wider church—participate in exploring and establishing this covenantal relationship, discerning God's will together.

Responsibility of the Local Church Exploring Covenant

By the time a local church discerns its readiness to enter covenantal relationship its members should have widespread conversation, knowledge and familiarity of the identity, history, theology, and polity of the United Church of Christ. Preparation for this step will also include active participation in the life of the United Church of Christ, in as many settings as possible.

Churches should form a Covenant Development Committee in the early stages of exploration to represent the church in its contacts with the United Church of Christ, and to ensure wide participation and knowledge throughout the congregation. This group should also plan ways to introduce their local church to the Association and make its culture, traditions, and commitments deeply known and understood.

Responsibility of the Association and Conference

In the United Church of Christ, the Association and Conference play the primary role in guiding the process whereby local churches may explore and develop covenantal relationship. The Association or Conference staff or representative committee will identify a Sponsoring Church, offer guidance in organizational matters, and network the local church with consultants from the national setting of the United Church of Christ.

Responsibility of the Sponsoring Church

The sponsoring church will provide fellowship and welcome to the local church exploring covenant. The sponsoring church will nurture shared experiences which will introduce the local church to the United Church of Christ and provide opportunities for the exploring congregation's discernment of God's will and its development of covenantal relationships.

Representatives of the National Setting

Representatives from the Covenanted Ministries of the United Church of Christ may play a role in this process of covenantal exploration, and may be invited to participate by the Association. In certain cases a staff member from the national setting may be involved

from the beginning of the exploration, working collaboratively with the Association throughout the process of exploring and entering covenant.

Establishing Covenant: Guidelines for the Process

The process of establishing covenantal relationship between a local church and an Association of the United Church of Christ has three main stages: exploring covenantal relationship, developing covenantal relationship, and affirming covenantal relationship.

The first stage is a preliminary exploration, an introductory acquaintance that helps a local church and Association decide if there is likelihood for establishing a formal relationship. Questions to consider at this stage include: What are the affinities we sense with potential covenant partners? Why is there an interest in exploring covenant with the United Church of Christ?

If both the local church exploring covenantal relationship and the Association discern there is likelihood of covenant, they enter a second stage, and agree to develop that covenant together. As with all relationships, it will take time and a wealth of shared experiences to help this covenant fully develop.

Should the development stage conclude with a request for standing, in all likelihood the final stage will be an affirmation of covenant for both parties.

Stage One: Covenant Exploration

At this stage, a local church that seeks standing in the United Church of Christ initiates contact with the Association or Conference in which it is located. Informal discussions focus on history, polity and practice, as well as the reasons for exploration and help determine whether a formal, intensive process will follow. Since a substantial initial knowledge is needed, this phase may take from six months to a year, depending on previous knowledge and the pace of the exploration. This initial acquaintance should be comprehensive enough to provide an answer to this central question: Is it likely that a covenantal relationship will result from further exploration?

As deeply and sincerely as the United Church of Christ welcomes local churches, it also recognizes the importance of discernment between potential covenantal partners. Careful preliminary discussions should reveal God's will for a suitable relationship. Sometimes a local church and an Association of the United Church of Christ will decide to remain ecumenical colleagues but not to continue exploring covenant, at least for the present time. When this is the discernment of either partner in exploration, the United Church of Christ affirms its solidarity in Christ with all who believe, and celebrate ecumenical unity even though exploration of covenantal partnership ends at this stage.

If the discussion reveals the likelihood of a covenantal commitment, the partners move on to further develop their relationship. The local church and Association then enter into a stage of "Covenant Development."

Stage Two: Covenant Development

During this stage the local church and the Association enter into a formal relationship. Associations may vote to grant the local church a specific status as a "Church in Covenant Development." This status recognizes the commitment that both the local church and the Association have made to deepen and broaden their knowledge of, and appreciation for, one another.

A Church in Covenant Development is granted voice without vote at Association and Conference meetings for the duration of this stage of establishing covenantal relationship. The local church sends representatives to the meetings as an important way to develop the local church and the denomination. Typically a full meeting of an Association takes place once a year and a Conference conducts an annual meeting, so for that reason alone this phase of the process may last one to two years. Another factor that requires planning and ample time is the need to involve many members of the Church in Covenant Development, the Sponsoring Church and the Association in this stage of developing covenant. The Church in Covenant Development will want to provide means for the Association to become involved in its congregational life in ways that will assist the discernment process.

The Church in Covenant Development and the Association will remain in this relationship until both are comfortable that ample time and effort have been devoted to discerning God's will.

Until these final decisions are made, standing remains an option, and discernment is not concluded. Throughout this stage, a positive attitude toward standing is paired with a concern to honor the time and space for a faithful discernment process.

There are two possible outcomes of this formal period of developing covenant, each of which affirms the particular nature of the covenant developed by the local church and the Association:

Determination not to seek standing. The Church in Covenant Development, the Association, or both, separately or mutually, may discern that it is not God's will for the Church in Covenant Development to seek standing. If this determination is made, the United Church of Christ affirms its solidarity in Christ with all who believe, and celebrates ecumenical unity even though exploration of covenantal partnership ends at this stage.

Determination to make a formal request for standing. Together the Church in Covenant Development and the Association affirm that it is God's will for the local church to seek standing in the United Church of Christ.

Stage Three: Covenant Affirmation

During this stage the Association receives the formal request from the Church in Covenant Development and acts upon it. If the request is approved, the Association formally accepts the request and grants standing in the United Church of Christ to the

local church. The timing of this vote will usually be determined by the Association's meeting schedule, but will be taken within a year of the formal request.

The Sponsoring Church will be thanked for its ministry during the discernment process and may play a role in the celebration of the covenant affirmation.

The Association, with its newly received local church, will consecrate the establishment of covenantal partnership by the worship of God and in celebration of the Church's oneness in Christ. See the Supplemental Materials section of this manual for suggested worship materials for use in planning such a service of worship.

941

Church Considering Covenant	Sponsoring Church	Association or Conference
1. The leadership of a local church wishes to explore standing in the UCC will approach the Association in which it is located through a staff person or other member of the Association.		
		2. The Association, through an appropriate committee, will meet with and welcome representatives of the exploring church and provide initial information, and support to help the church in its discernment.
3. Undertake exploration of the UCC, including meeting with designated representatives of the Association.		3. Designate a contact person or working group to assist local church in its exploration. Receives information about the church that is exploring.
4. Determine whether exploration has shown a **likelihood** that further development of relationship will result in a covenantal bond.		4. Determine whether exploration has shown a **likelihood** that further development of relationship will result in a covenantal bond.
5a. If not: agree to remain ecumenical colleagues. **OR:** 5b. If so: begin Developing Covenant stage: receive from Association designation as a Church in Covenant Development; name a working group to represent the local church; and to meet with leaders of the Sponsoring Church.	5b. Accept invitation to sponsor the Church in Covenant Development and meet with leaders of the process from both the Association and the Church in Covenant Development.	5a. If not: agree to remain ecumenical colleagues. **OR:** 5b. If so: begin Developing Covenant stage: designate the local church as a Church in Covenant Development; name a working group to represent the Association; designate a Sponsoring Church and introduce its leaders to the Church in Covenant Development and to the Association contacts.
6. The Covenant Development Committee and other church leaders assure widespread conversation, knowledge, and familiarity with the UCC.	6. Become familiar with the Church in Covenant Development, introduce that church's members to local church life in the UCC, and accompany its leaders to Association, Conference, and wider church events. Assure ample opportunity for developing and deepening a relationship.	6. Assures widespread conversation, knowledge, and familiarity with the Church in Covenant Development. Invite consultation and collaboration, as appropriate, with Conference and wider church leaders.
7. In consultation with the Association, determine readiness to enter into covenant with the United Church of Christ.	7. Provide feedback to all other parties about the opportunities for relationship development that have been pursued.	7. In consultation with the local church working group, determine whether the leaders and membership of the Church in Covenant Development have adequate understanding and appreciation of the UCC to enter into covenant.
8a. If not: agree to remain ecumenical colleagues. **OR:** 8b. Make a formal request for standing in the UCC.	8a. Agree to remain ecumenical colleagues. **OR:** 8b. Affirm its relationship with the local church, as is appropriate in the Association's process.	8a.If not: agree to remain ecumenical colleagues. **OR:** 8b. Receive and vote on the formal request for standing. Thank the Sponsoring Church.
9. Plan, celebrate and consecrate covenant with the Association.	9. May help plan and celebrate the covenant.	9. Plan, celebrate and consecrate covenant with the local church.

Dissolution of Covenantal Partnership Standing

If partners can choose to enter covenantal relationships then they can also choose to exit covenant. Just as careful planning and attentive ministry help to enhance a budding covenantal relationship, they also aid the process of dissolution.

If a Local Church Considers Dissolving Covenantal Partnership

The Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ allows for the local church to voluntarily "withdraw by its own decision" its membership in the denomination. *Constitution*, Article V, paragraph 18. At the outset, a local church that is contemplating the dissolution of covenant with the United Church of Christ should engage the Association Minister or Conference Minister in prayerful discernment.

Covenantal Support Consultation

Further, before exploring dissolution of the covenant every effort should be made by covenantal partners to see if differences can be resolved and the covenant preserved. To this end, the covenantal partners - representatives of the Association, the local church and the pastor – should engage in a concerted effort of deliberate conversation outlining issues, concerns and grievances of each of the parties and to explore ways to address those issues and seek reconciliation.

Closure of a Local Church

For some congregations this dissolution of covenant is an "end of life" decision made when the local church ceases its operations. Dialogue with Association or Conference staff is important for guidance and spiritual nurture as the local church contemplates its decision to close. It is appropriate to hold a service of gratitude to honor the church's ministry.

Withdrawal Because of Disagreement

Occasionally a local church will contemplate withdrawal from the United Church of Christ because of perceived irreconcilable differences in belief or action. Before coming to such a determination, the local church should review its covenant vows. Dialogue with Association or Conference ministers or their representatives is imperative, and may ensure that unwarranted assumptions and misinformation are not the cause of rupture in the covenant. Dialogue is also needed with the appropriate covenantal partners to outline a common timetable for discussion, decision, and potential dissolution. If the promises of covenant partners come to an end, the local church will need to secure its own tax-exempt status. If there are outstanding loans or financial obligations, the church and its United Church of Christ partners will have to come to agreement concerning payment.

Unilateral breach of covenant ruptures the congregation's relationship not only with the wider settings of Church, it ruptures the congregation's relationship with its own forebears who established the covenantal ties, and ruptures the local church's relationship with God who entered into the making and living out of covenant.

Official notification of a local church's decision to leave the United Church of Christ should be made promptly, by certified letter, to the Chair of the Committee on the Ministry.

Because it is the Association, or Conference acting as an Association, which confers standing, it is the right and responsibility of the Association to decide to dissolve the bonds of covenantal partnership. As the *Constitution* makes clear, the Association "determines, confers, and certifies to the standing of the Local Churches of the United Church of Christ within its area." *Constitution*, Article VIII, paragraph 40. That means a decision to dissolve covenant takes two partners: the local church may vote to leave, but only the Association may remove standing. Even at this terminal juncture in a covenant journey the partners are called upon to "walk together."

It is appropriate to hold a joint Service of Dissolution of Covenant to honor the past relationship between the local church and other settings of the United Church of Christ. Forgiveness, release from responsibilities and promises to display Christian maturity and respect toward past covenantal partners are each important aspects of such a worship event. See the Supplemental Materials section of this manual for suggested worship materials for use in planning such a service of worship.

If an Association or Conference Considers Dissolving Covenantal Partnership with a Local Church

The Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ give no clear indication as to whether an Association or Conference might initiate the dissolution of standing of a local church because of perceived irreconcilable differences in belief or action. There is no consensus of practice among Associations and Conferences at present. Most discern appropriate action on a case-by-case basis. Others have set policies for adjudicating the removal of local church standing. Clearly this is an arena of covenantal partnership that needs dialogue across the Church.

As Associations and Conferences explore the possibility of taking the initiative to dissolve covenantal partnership with a local church, they must weigh many matters, including the following factors.

Theological Understandings of Covenant

How does the Association model its beliefs? Does it view God's will in to hold partners to diligent mutual responsibilities or covenant to offer unending grace? There is a spectrum of interpretation concerning the tension of judgment and mercy with regard to covenant. Where do you put the greatest emphasis, on the prerogative of God to require righteous behavior or to offer the widest welcome?

Legal implications

Associations need to have sound policy in place concerning the potential for dissolving covenantal partnership. Fair procedures with clear paths of appeal must be worked out and communicated broadly across the Association. Legal counsel should be sought before writing such policy, and current practice should be reviewed as well.

Because the United Church of Christ is not a hierarchical polity, courts may take into consideration the policy and practices of any one Association or Conference when making adjudications concerning another Association or Conference. That is, the policy and decisions of an Association in one region of the nation may have unforeseen implications for all Associations or for the whole United Church of Christ. Since there is no current common practice among Conferences or Associations, and indeed, scant clarity from the *Constitution and Bylaws* concerning an Association seeking to dissolve covenant with a local church, covenantal partners across the United Church of Christ are called on to engage in dialogue and action on this matter.

Unlike a Fitness Review

The Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team cautions against approaches that seek to dissolve covenant with local churches by disciplinary means parallel to the Fitness Review process used with authorized ministers. Local churches are complex systems that do not lend themselves to such an investigative procedure. Often one leader or a small group of leaders turns a local church away from covenantal relations through neglect or disagreement. Calling the entire local church body into question is not germane under such circumstances.

Covenantal integrity

Confession is important in covenantal relationships. Often it is easier to see the "speck" in the eye of a local church than admit to the "log" in the eye of a Conference or Association. An Association should not consider dissolving covenantal relationship with a local church unless or until all avenues of nurture and support have been utilized. Policies concerning the growth and development of covenantal relations should be in place and enforced. Otherwise, any effort to discipline or dissolve covenant with a local church is premature.

Process which honors covenant

As with policies for timely and appropriate nurture and support of local churches, Associations should offer opportunities for mediation of conflict, growth plans, and the ability to reconsider or appeal a decision to dissolve covenantal partnership. These efforts should all precede any terminal decision.

Honoring all covenant partners

An Association's decisions concerning expectations, discipline and dissolution of covenant involve all covenant partners. Therefore it is important to consider with sensitivity how other local and wider settings of Church perceive a decision to dissolve covenantal partnership between an Association and local church.

Characteristics of Faithful Covenantal Relationships

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit,
creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant a faithful people of all ages,
tongues, and races.

You call us into your church
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be your servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world
and to resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.
UCC Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology, paragraphs 2-3.

In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility. Constitution, Article V, paragraph 17.

Where do we go from here? We gain important perspective and organizational framework from the chapters of this manual. Still, covenants, by their nature, are open ended. How will we know if we are faithfully "walking together in all of God's ways? What should we look for as the characteristics of faithful covenant relationships? The following touchstones point the way.

Celebrate the Journey

Partners in a living covenant experience the joy of freedom to express their unique spiritual gifts and offerings. Some may read these pages looking to see if local churches or Associations "measure up" to their respective responsibilities. However, that is only one side of the coin. The other is to celebrate with joy the benefits of covenantal relationships. Without reliance on one another, partners in covenant would be weaker expressions of the good news of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit we are blessed with abundance as we share in common Christian experience.

The journey of "walking together in all of God's ways" is not unlike the Easter journey of the two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. Along the way, as they worried, reasoned and learned together they knew the power of the risen Christ in their midst. Covenantal partners build rich Christian community by means of shared experiences.

The Witness of Integrity

As partners get to know one another, they become aware of their own, and each other's flaws. When we enter and live within covenant, we commit to God our intention to be our best. We witness to the Church and the world to the extent that we exercise personal and

corporate integrity and spiritual maturity. When we fail to exercise sound self-control, we weaken the Church in all its settings.

God's Mission in the World

Every setting of Church faces strong and present temptation to prioritize institutional concerns above the furtherance of God's mission. Covenant partners show faithfulness when they "keep the main thing the main thing." United Church of Christ covenant partners find ample opportunities to "walk together" in mission to the world through advocacy, networking and hands-on experience.

As representative expressions of the United Church of Christ, covenantal partners share in the responsibility to inform and be informed about General Synod. As covenantal relationships deepen and communication among partners gains depth and transparency, covenantal partners strengthen their ability to engage each other as interpreters of General Synod actions. This dynamic exchange of ideas leads to prophetic witness in mission.

Authorized Ministers of the United Church of Christ

Both the local and wider settings of Church have a covenantal responsibility to support and care for authorized ministers and those "In Care," that is in the process of exploring ministerial vocation. The specific responsibilities of each covenantal partner with regard to authorization of ministers are detailed in the *Manual on Ministry.*

Clergy are ordained, and lay ministers are commissioned or licensed into the United Church of Christ. Thus, they have obligations to share their skills and spiritual gifts with the wider church as well as with the local setting where they serve. All settings of the United Church of Christ should honor with gratitude and sensitivity the service its authorized ministers offer to the wider church.

Nurture and Accountability

Good covenantal relationships grow from shared experiences and sound communication. Covenant partners see respectful dialogue and the sharing of needs and concerns in a timely manner as necessities for mutual nurture and accountability within the United Church of Christ.

Some Associations and Conferences are exploring what it means to "walk together" by initiating pro-active, regular visits to each local churches in their territory. These visitations by laity active in the life of the Association connect local church members with resources of the United Church of Christ and foster celebration and support.

Some Associations and Conferences are exploring what it means to "walk together" by forging policies that spell out discipline for local churches that repeatedly, and with deliberate forethought, ignore, neglect, or rupture covenant. These Associations call congregations to serious consideration and commitment to God and one another within the bounds of covenant.

Some within the United Church of Christ favor an emphasis on a program of certification or self-evaluation by covenantal partners in a vein similar to the accreditation of colleges. Aided by the evaluation of peers, local churches or wider church expressions of the United Church of Christ could embark on a self-study to clarify how to improve their vitality and Christian witness as a representative body of the United Church of Christ in their community.

While there is currently no common practice among Associations and Conferences regarding nurture and accountability with local churches, hopefully this manual will spark ideas, discussion, and the sharing of exemplary practices concerning nurture and accountability of covenantal partners.

Transformative Change

Does it all seem overwhelming? How can we ever accomplish a more faithful journey as covenantal partners? If we institute discipline reviews or covenantal visitation, how would we plan for the training and organization needed? Our staff and committees are overwhelmed as it is.

As in every age, the Church faces needs that beg for transformative change. Structures and relationships will shift and align themselves as we come to honor the particularities of our covenant expectations. Perhaps it is the last and best characteristic of faithful covenantal partners to become vision casters. Let us do so in response to the great challenge that the United Church of Christ

> *looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world….It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression and in purity of heart before God. Constitution,* Preamble, paragraph 2.

Supplemental Materials

Worship Resources

Service of Entering Covenantal Relationship

The Order for Reception of a Local Church into the United Church of Christ beginning on page 439 in the *Book of Worship* is the common starting point for Associations and Conferences as they develop services of worship to publicly grant standing and establish covenant ties with newly developed congregations or established congregations that desire to affiliate with the United Church of Christ. As the *Book of Worship* states, this order of service may be adapted for use in particular situations. In this vein, the Parish Life and Leadership Team advises amending the covenant vows on page 443 so that the promises local church members make are in parity with those that association members promise. Underscore our common covenant by including the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, where indicated in the order of service.

In addition to that additional wording, a more detailed listing of the expectations of covenantal partners may be included--as a bulletin insert to be viewed but not spoken, as a document to be formally signed during the Order of Reception of a Local Church, or as a portion of the verbal promises made between the church and the association.

In keeping with the mutual responsibility of covenantal partners, the closing Declaration should also include a brief statement concerning how the promises affect the relationship between the Association/Conference and the congregations, such as: "Today we declare before God that_____(congregation) and_____ (Association /Conference) hold one another to mutual accountability as covenantal partners in the United Church of Christ."

Service of Dissolution of Covenantal Relationship

Congregations and Associations/Conferences may choose to mark the end of their covenantal partnership in a public service of worship when a church closes, when a congregation chooses to leave the denomination, or when the Association dissolves the standing of a congregation. Depending on context, the style and content of an order for the dissolution of covenantal relationship might appropriately take on aspects of a funeral, a celebration of life, a divorce, an act of reconciliation, or a healing service. Representatives of the congregation and the Association should jointly plan such services of worship. A neutral third party may be asked to preside over the planning and carrying out of the service of worship.

In most cases, the Order for Corporate Reconciliation (*Book of Worship*, p. 275) will serve well as a foundation upon which to shape a service of worship for the dissolution of covenantal relationship. In that order of service, Examination of Conscience choice A is preferable, Call to Confession choices B or C are helpful. The Benediction found at B page 295 rings an appropriate tone.

Closure of a Congregation: A scripted recap of the church's history, mission and legacy may take the place of a sermon. People may be invited to share in scripted or spontaneous dialogue, and all present may be given an opportunity to offer mutual consolation.

Prayers that have been shaped for memorial services may be appropriate in this time of corporate grief, such as those in the *Book of Worship*, choice A on page 376, and choice C on page 377. Words of Commendation may be said, as in the *Book of Worship*, choice A on page 381.

Include a statement of release from the promises made as covenantal partners.

Dissolution of Standing: Appropriate ministry of oversight can include marking the end of failed covenantal relationship with a public service of worship. Accountability and nurture are both served by the important grief work of planning and carrying out a service of dissolution.

Associations/Conferences may desire to have a public service that removes congregational standing and allows for a respectful parting of the ways. The congregation that is exiting the United Church of Christ may not desire such a formality. There may not be sufficient goodwill between the former covenant partners to join together in worship. In such circumstances, representatives of the congregation and Association/Conference may pray together privately and release one another from the promises made as covenantal partners.

If a public service is planned, the Order for Corporate Reconciliation may be abbreviated to omit a sermon or informal dialogue, and to forego an affirmation of faith and Holy Communion. The service of worship should be planned jointly and scripted in full with all parties agreeing to be respectful of one another. It is appropriate to remember the joy and mutual ministry of the partners as they lived in covenantal relationship. Where possible, acknowledge respect in disagreement and Christian maturity as the covenant is ended. The tone and order of the service may borrow from the Book of Worship's Recognition of the End of a Marriage service (*Book of Worship*, p. 291)

Other Resources

Those seeking to grow as covenantal partners may find these resources related to ministry in the United Church of Christ to be helpful. Call for current pricing. Order all resources from United Church of Christ Resources, Inc. at 1-800-537-3394.

A Local Church Seeks a Pastor. A notebook of material to help a church from the time a pastor resigns to the installation of the next pastor.

Book of Worship. A book of services and resources for the United Church of Christ. This inclusive-language *Book of Worship* includes an Order for Reception of a Local Church into the United Church of Christ.

Considering a New Church Covenant in the United Church of Christ. A booklet for use by established congregations that inquire about exploring standing with the United Church of Christ. Developed by Local Church Ministries.

Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ. Includes the preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ and Constitutional and Bylaw provisions guiding the life of the Church. Available online at www.ucc.org. Booklet available through United Church of Christ Resources.

Freedom with Order: The Doctrine of the Church in the United Church of Christ. Robert S. Paul. This book encourages a discussion of the doctrines of the United Church of Christ that will faithfully express both the historical traditions and the ecumenical imperatives that formed the denomination.

The Leaders Box. More than 150 topics vital to the life of the local church. Topics are divided into four sections: leadership perspectives; position descriptions for officers and organizations; task and skill development; and spiritual growth. Available for download only.

The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ, Barbara Brown Zikmund, series editor. See especially Volume 7.

Manual on Ministry: Perspectives and Procedures for Ecclesiastical Authorization of Ministry. Outlines procedures for the authorization, review and discipline of ordained, commissioned and licensed ministers and ordained ministerial partners.

United and Uniting: The Meaning of an Ecclesial Journey. Louis H. Gunnemann. This book provides historical perspective and a call to recover the original vision for a greater understanding of the denomination.

United Church of Christ History and Program. A booklet describing the origins, development, and style of life of the United Church of Christ. Includes a statement of Faith for use in the United Church of Christ.

United Church of Christ Yearbook. Includes a directory of officers, national setting staff, directors, and corporate boards; a directory of personnel related to the United Church of Christ; and a directory of United Church of Christ ordained ministers in full standing, commissioned ministers, and other lay leaders.

www.ucc.org

www.stillspeaking.org

Glossary

ASSOCIATION. An Association or Conference acting as an Association is that body within a Conference of the United Church of Christ that is composed of all local churches in a geographical area, as well as all ordained ministers with standing or ministerial partnership standing, commissioned ministers with standing, and those licensed ministers who have been granted voting membership in the Association. An Association determines, confers, and certifies to the standing of the local churches of the United Church of Christ within its area. An Association grants, certifies to, transfers and terminates ordained ministerial standing or ordained ministerial partner standing in the United Church of Christ.

COMMITTEE ON THE MINISTRY. The Committee on the Ministry is the body in an Association or Conference that is delegated responsibilities for church and ministry concerns.

CHURCH AND MINISTRY COMMITTEE. A name some Associations use in place of the Committee on the Ministry.

CHURCH IN COVENANT DEVELOPMENT. A designation given by an Association to an established church from another denomination that is exploring covenantal standing with the United Church of Christ.

CONFERENCE. A Conference is that body of the United Church of Christ which is composed of all local churches in a geographical area (except the Calvin Synod), as well as all ordained ministers with standing or ministerial partnership standing in its Associations or in the Conference itself when acting as an Association, all commissioned ministers in its Associations, and those licensed ministers who have been granted voting membership in its Associations.

COVENANTAL PARTNER. Any expression of the United Church of Christ (see *Constitution*, Article III). Generally, covenantal partners are considered to be the church in local, Association, Conference, and national settings. Authorized ministers may also be referred to as covenantal partners.

COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP. A covenantal relationship is the state of being bound together through commitments to and expectations of one another in faithfulness to God's will and reliance upon God's grace.

COVENANTED MINISTRY. A term used when speaking of one or more of the national setting entities: Office of the General Ministries, Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, and Justice and Witness Ministries. Their counterparts before Restructure were known as "instrumentalities".

GENERAL SYNOD. General Synod is the biennial meeting of the United Church of Christ. Representatives of congregations, Conferences and a broad range of interest groups meet every two years to consider the business of the church and its relationship with the wider world. Because every UCC congregation is self-governing, the General Synods' resolutions speak "to" but not "for" the local church.

LOCAL CHURCH. A local church is a body of Christians who, believing in God, and accepting of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness.

PARISH LIFE AND LEADERSHIP MINISTRY TEAM. Parish Life and Leadership is the ministry team of Local Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ that, among its responsibilities, provides leadership and resources related to church and ministry concerns.

SCHEDULE 1 AND 2 CHURCHES. These churches are not members of the United Church of Christ but maintain an historic relationship with the Association in which they are located. At the time of merger, Schedule 1 churches did not vote to join the United Church of Christ but asked for and were granted continued relationship with their Associations. Schedule 2 Local Churches voted not to join the United Church of Christ but requested and were granted continuation with their respective Associations.

SEARCH AND CALL PROCESS. The means whereby United Church of Christ local churches may conduct a nationwide search for pastoral leadership among authorized ministers of the United Church of Christ, and whereby authorized ministers of the United Church of Christ can conduct a search for United Church of Christ local churches in need of pastoral leadership.

STANDING OF A LOCAL CHURCH. Standing of a local church in an Association is a designation conferred by the Association that recognizes the local church is a covenantal partner in the United Church of Christ.

YEARBOOK. The Yearbook is the official directory of the United Church of Christ. It is updated and published annually by the Office of General Ministries. It contains such data as statistics on local churches and Conferences, listings of ordained ministers in full standing, commissioned ministers, persons serving on national agencies, and institutions related to the United Church of Christ.

---

[1] *The Minister's Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, 1963. St. Louis, Eden Publishing House, p. 3.

[2] Walker, Randi. This and the following comments on ecclesiology in the *Statement of Faith* are excerpts from *The Evolution of a UCC Style*, forthcoming in 2005, Pilgrim Press, are used with the author's permission.

[3] Campbell, Alexander. *The Covenant Story of the Bible*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1963, p. 11.

[4] Kalp, Larry E., editor. *Confirming Our Faith*, United Church Press, 1980, p. 172.

[5] The key factors noted below are summarized from a lecture by Elizabeth Nordbeck to a UCC History and Polity course given at Andover Newton Theological Seminary beginning in 1994.
[6] Walker, Randi. *Ibid.*
[7] Donald D. Freeman, "Autonomy in a Covenant Polity", first published in *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ*.
[8] Louis H. Gunnemann, "Order and Identity in the United Church of Christ," *New Conversations* v.4 no.2 (Fall 1979), 15. Reuben A. Sheares elaborated on this in a manner very similar to this essay in " A Covenant Polity," chap. 7 in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the Unite Church of Christ*, ed. Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 67-78.
[9] This statement is the stated theme of Donald D. Freeman's article, "Autonomy in a Covenant Polity", first published in *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ*. The following section of the *Manual on Church* abridges and edits Freeman's article, with the author's permission.
[10]This section of the *Manual on Church* is an abridged form of the *United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry, Section 8*.
[11] See the *United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry, Section 8*, for a detailed linguistic explanation of *episcope*.
[12] Parts of an Association's responsibilities may be carried out by a Conference. Hereafter when this manual uses the term Association, is shall be read as intending "Association, or Conference acting as Association."
[13] Much of the next two sections of this manual was first shaped by the Church and Ministry Committee of the Chicago Metropolitan Association and is used with permission.
[14] Article IV of the *Bylaws of the United Church of Christ* delineates specific responsibilities of Associations as they work in partnership with each of the four covenanted ministries of the national church.
[15] This section is condensed from its foundational document, *Considering a New Church Covenant in the United Church of Christ*, PLL603, prepared by the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team and the Evangelism Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ, 2003.

Written by The Rev. Jayne Ryan Kuroiwa
Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team
United Church of Christ
700 Prospect Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44115

August 30, 2004

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

2005 - LOCAL CHURCH MINISTRIES

Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team
700 Prospect Ave E - Cleveland, OH 44115
866-822.8224